

Town of Duxbury Had No Fire Department at Turn of Century

At a Special Town Meeting on June 11, 1904, it was voted that the Selectmen investigate the matter of fire protection in other towns and report at the next annual Town Meeting. The following informal vote was carried unanimously: "That it is advisable that the fire apparatus be paid for partly by the Town and partly by the property owners in each section."

By 1905 Elsha Peterson was in charge of a fire wagon that was kept loaded with extinguishers, chemicals, a barrel of water, pails, shovels and other equipment. According to Mr. Hortense E. Merry, who came here in 1899 after taking part in the Spanish-American War (he was born in Nova Scotia), there was no real fire department at the time. This does not mean that there had not previously been a fire department of some kind, for the records show that in 1834 and 1835 two Hunneman hand-engines were purchased. Eben N. Briggs, our present Fire Chief, showed us a photostat of an 1835 transaction that said: "Rec. of Gershom Bradford Esq. Treasurer for the Town of Duxbury, six hundred & eighty two dollars and 88 cents for the payment of Mr. Hunneman's bill for a fire Engine for the Town of Duxbury, which we the Subscribers were, appointed by said Town to purchase." (We reproduce this receipt just as it was written).

Henry Wadsworth and Peleg Keen were on the board of engineers at the time of these purchases. There were 29 men in the No. 1 company, 27 in No. 2. The Selectmen at the time were Elbridge Chandler, Daniel E. Rosworth and Samuel Atwell.

Old Hand-Tubs

Just what transpired between 1834 and 1947, when a 750-gallon pumper was added to Duxbury's fire-fighting equipment, nobody seems to know, and this brief account is at best a sketch of conditions since the turn of the century. The 750-gallon pumper, which replaced the 1923 Brockway, carries 1200 feet of two and one-half inch hose, and has a ladder and a 150-gallon booster tank with 250 feet of booster hose. It is a far cry from the two hand-tubs which were bought more than 40 years ago, and which are presently stored in a barn on Standish St. Today the Fire Department has three engines. The Forest Fire Department has five, and there is also a fire rescue boat.

According to Mr. Hortense Merry, certain Duxbury citizens were stirred up when Alexander Wadsworth's house on Washington St. burned early in this century. He says that Captain Alexander's widow left some hot ashes in a wooden container in the shed. A fire was started that burned unchecked because "we had to stand around helpless watching it. We didn't have adequate equipment. Later, at a Town Meeting, the people voted to buy two hand-engines, horse-drawn hand-pumpers with a sort of fence rail on the side."

Site of Old Engine House

The Selectmen appointed a board of engineers, and Frederick R. Knapp was named chief engineer. There is some debate as to whether Frederick Knapp or Hortense Merry was the first fire chief of Duxbury, but from all that we could learn from perusing the town reports, the term chief of the fire department was not used until Mr. Merry was given the title. It boils down to a matter of nomenclature. For all practical purposes, Duxbury's first fire chief seems to have been Frederick R. Knapp, to be succeeded by Eden Soule, Hortense Merry and Eben Briggs.

It was Mr. Knapp who first recommended that large areas of woodland be divided into smaller sections by fire lines. "A line of cleared earth, one or two feet wide, on which to start back fires, would in many cases enable a small force of men with extinguishers to stop a strong fire which they would be powerless to check otherwise." These were the words of Mr. Knapp as quoted in a Town Report dated January 1, 1906.

The Fire Engineers Board was organized on March 7, 1906. A new engine house was built for Engine No. 1 on land adjoining the present site of the Library. (Before this library was built the Town Office, now moved across the street, occupied the site). At this time Mr. Knapp was called chief engineer. Two captains were named to organize companies composed of 20 men each, and at this time a plot of land measuring 40 by 125 feet was purchased on Chestnut St. near Depot St. to house Engine No. 2. In 1906 Duxbury had three fire wagons and two private ones. It was decided that the most serviceable wagons were those fitted with extinguishers, a water barrel, and "light enough for one horse to pull."

With few exceptions, there have been no really spectacular fires in Duxbury (and let's preserve this record). Here's a typical entry taken from the 1908 Town Report: "During the year 1908 Engine No. 1 responded to two fires of dwelling houses, one garage and several grass

fires." Signed Capt. H. E. Merry."

By 1914 the town had a Forest Fire Department. "When the town can afford a motor truck properly equipped, that would be worth more than all the rest of the apparatus," read an entry in the 1914 Town Report. In 1916 Hortense E. Merry succeeded Eden W. Soule, and was later designated fire chief. On the board of engineers were James L. McNaught, Charles R. Crocker and LeRoy M. Peterson. In 1918 Mr. Merry asked for an appropriation for motor-driven piece of apparatus for South Duxbury "as there are practically no horses available."

Perhaps Duxbury's worst fire loss came in 1921 when historic Ford's Store, "America's first department store," was burned. As late as 1922, the town was still handicapped if it had two fires to fight at once.

Mr. Merry in 1942 was succeeded by Eben N. Briggs, who is carrying on the fine traditions inaugurated by his predecessor. Mr. Merry likes to reminisce about the old days "when we used to drill every night, then sit down to hot coffee, doughnuts and cheese." In his 39 years of fire-fighting in Duxbury, he saw drama. When the L. P. Soule house (across from the Winsor House) burned, five adjoining houses were at one time burning. "And," says Mr. Merry, "there was for a time no water. The Jacob Sever house was ignited by sparks. Mr. Merry can remember having to break into three houses at the fire to get buckets of water. He also remembers that Jake Sever and Ed O'Brien, whose house was also singed, each donated checks of \$50 to the fire department for a job well done.

There is no space to list men who served the fire department without pay for a score of years, or the fun the fire-fighters had when they tried to see which company engine could squirt water the farthest. Mr. Merry recalls the arson case, when a man named Lombardia got five years for trying to defraud an insurance company by burning his house. He also remembers those Christmases during the depression when the fire department gathered, repaired, and painted toys for needy kiddies of the town.

One year we sent out presents to the youngsters."

Mr. Merry was too modest to say much about it, but we learned from another source that he inaugurated the Junior Fire Department and the custom of having honorary members. And when the first Duxbury Days was held on July 4, 1922, we have an idea that man like James T. O'Neill who sparked the idea, patterned the program on the field days and the musters our firemen used to have. It is an honor today to belong to the Duxbury Fire Department. From what we could gather from a quick look-see at the records, it always has been. It's an institution, not merely a group of paid employees.

KIWANIS CLUB

Duxbury Kiwanis held its regular weekly meeting at White Bros. Restaurant on Wednesday, July 26, at 7:15 p.m. The meeting was opened by president Thomas Kenney, with 31 members, two visiting members and two visitors present.

After the invocation by the Rev. Mr. Carl Hall, retiring Chaplain of Duxbury Kiwanis, a delicious steak dinner was served. Mr. John Cutler and Mr. Henry Feeley who were guests, were introduced to the members.

District Secretary George Whoriskey, of Cambridge and George Parker of Marshfield Kiwanis were again welcomed to the meeting, and members heartily received as a new member and future chaplain of the club, the Rev. Mr. William S. Anthony. It was announced at the meeting that the New England District Convention would take place at Hotel Griswold on September 7-10 in New London, Conn. President Thomas Kenney, Jr., vice-president Robert Finneran and Pierce Murphy were nominated and chosen as delegates to this meeting. Alternate delegates were John Marshall, Winsor White and Frederick Reed.

After acceptance of Mr. Al Moritz's kind offer to stage a benefit performance for the Kiwanis Aid to Youth Fund, the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 p.m.